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WASHINGTON CLOSE-UP

# Self-Confident Era Seems Doomed

By RICHARD FRYKLUND

Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara is convinced that the United States cannot defend itself successfully in a big nuclear war—no matter what heroic efforts it may attempt.

His gloomy calculations have convinced the President, and current military and foreign policy decisions are being based on this unprecedented—for the United States—conclusion.

Americans have always assumed that their country was powerful enough to beat anyone, to solve any power problem simply by making the necessary effort. There were disputes over the proper method, but every public official who took the oath to "preserve, protect and defend" the United States assumed that he could really do it.

But some very convincing McNamara calculations show that the age of self-confidence has closed. The United States will forever be as naked to a Russian attack as the Belgians or Poles or Austrians have been to the attacks of their neighbors for some centuries.

What is even more uncomfortable is the conviction of most knowledgeable defense analysts that the United States will be equally vulnerable in the near future to attacks from any two-bit country that wants to become a world menace.

The reason is simple. An effective nuclear offensive is cheap and easy but an effective defense is impossible.

There are 30 to 40 countries today that have the technical skill and the money to build and maintain a force of 500 first-class intercontinental ballistic missiles, similar to the American Minuteman. The cost would be from $500 million to a billion dollars a year, according to Herman Kahn. The technology of rocketry and nuclear warheads is well-known.

As the United States enters this uncomfortable new era, government leaders must answer some difficult questions.

For instance, how can the United States continue to promise to help defend Europe? A non-nuclear defense for Europe was always questionable and will soon be impossible. But the use of nuclear weapons would be suicidal for the United States. Clearly the American promise to use them if necessary is a bluff.

How can the United States handle blackmail threats from other nuclear powers? Administration leaders assume that Russian leaders understand the risks of nuclear war and are determined to avoid them, but what about the rest of the world?

Red China is demonstrating today that it can have a government irrational enough to destroy its own children for some doctrinal point. Unpredictable twists of history have put other madmen in power in other countries.

What does the United States do if some future Mexican government should begin to brood over the territories it lost to American aggression and threaten to win them back with nuclear missiles or die gloriously?

The nuclear policy of the United States today is simply to deter war. McNamara describes the U.S. nuclear arsenal to other world leaders. They see that they cannot survive an American retaliatory blow, so, in theory, they don't consider attacking.

But deterrence assumes that the other fellow will be rational. American military leaders, including all the Joint Chiefs of Staff, don't like to assume it. They want to be ready for irrational attacks, for accidents, for the 101 different situations studied by the theorists in which one or a dozen or a hundred missiles could be lobbed at the United States despite the deterrent threat.

The theorists concede that each of these situations is unlikely—just as unlikely, for instance, as a decision by the Kremlin to put nuclear missiles in Cuba and a threat by the United States to start a war if they aren't taken out.

These unlikely situations, multiplied by the uncountable future years in which nuclear weapons will exist, become a threat that worries civilian and military leaders alike.

Problems such as these are forcing the Johnson administration to look for new paths to national security—a "non-proliferation" treaty that might keep at least the honorable foreign countries from getting nuclear weapons; more and better non-nuclear weapons; a decrease in U.S. commitments to defend other countries; better relations with the trouble-making nations of the world; partial defenses against missiles that at least might handle the smaller threats and accidents.

But as other undefendable countries have found in the past, national security cannot be guaranteed.